

# Ronald V. Dellums

1935–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1971–1998  
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Born and raised in the northern California district that founded the free speech movement and the Black Panthers in the 1960s, Ronald Dellums embraced the activist spirit of the region, taking his seat in Congress in 1971 as an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War. Throughout his nearly three decade career in the House, Dellums remained true to his antiwar principles, consistently working to reduce the military budget. Initially a politician who believed more could be accomplished outside the establishment, the California Representative chaired two standing committees and became adept at building congressional coalitions to achieve his legislative agenda. “It was never about personal battles,” Dellums recalled upon his retirement from the House. “It has always been about ideas. Individuals come and go, but ideas must ultimately transcend, and ideas must ultimately prevail.”<sup>1</sup>

Ronald V. Dellums was born on November 24, 1935, in Oakland, California, to Verney Dellums, a Pullman porter and a longshoreman, and Willa Dellums, a beautician and government clerk. His uncle, C. L. Dellums—a leader in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union—served as a role model and as a political influence. Ron Dellums attended McClymonds High School before graduating from Oakland Technical High School in 1953. After a short stint at San Francisco City College, he enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1954. While in the service, Dellums married and had two children: Michael and Pam. He and his wife Arthurine later divorced. In 1956, at the end of his two-year enlistment in the Marines, he enrolled at Oakland City College, where he earned an associate’s degree in 1958. He continued his education at San Francisco State College, graduating with a B.A. in 1960. Two years later he was awarded a master’s degree in social work from the University of California at Berkeley.<sup>2</sup> In 1962 he

married Leola Roscoe Higgs, an attorney; the couple had a daughter, Piper, and two sons, Erik and Brandy. They divorced in 1999, and Dellums married Cynthia Lewis in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

After earning his master’s degree, Dellums worked in a series of social work jobs that promoted his involvement with community affairs and local politics in the Bay Area. He began his career as a psychiatric social worker for the California department of mental hygiene from 1962 to 1964. Between 1964 and 1968, Dellums directed several area programs, including the Bayview Community Center in San Francisco, Hunter’s Point Youth Opportunity Council, and the San Francisco Economic Opportunity Council. He later found employment at San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley as a lecturer and was employed as a senior consultant for manpower programs at Social Dynamics, Inc., from 1968 through 1970.<sup>4</sup> At the urging of friends and members of the community, Dellums made his first foray into politics when he sought and won a seat on the Berkeley city council in 1967. Asked to describe his approach to politics, he responded, “I’d listen and try to understand what people had to say, but then I’d act on my own beliefs. That’s the only way anyone should run for office.”<sup>5</sup>

From his seat on the council, Dellums, who had become a spokesperson for minorities and the disadvantaged, mounted a campaign in 1970 for the congressional seat encompassing the liberal bastion of Berkeley and nearby Oakland, one of the most populated and impoverished cities in California. In the primary, Dellums squared off against the six-term incumbent Jeffery Cohelan. Running on an antiwar platform, he criticized Cohelan’s late opposition to America’s involvement in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> As a young (34-year-old), African-American candidate, Dellums connected with the anti-establishment



current that was prevalent in Berkeley and Oakland. He also made a concerted effort to appeal to voters of various races in the diverse district. “[I] entered the campaign for Congress with a fervent belief that beyond ethnicity, it would be possible to bring women, labor, seniors, youths, and the poor into a coalition of the ‘powerless,’” he later recollects.<sup>7</sup> Dellums’s grass-roots campaigning ultimately helped him upset Cohelan. After garnering 55 percent of the vote, Dellums remarked that the race “brought up the new versus the old generation issue, war versus peace, open versus closed politics.”<sup>8</sup> The November general election attracted national attention despite the fact that Dellums was virtually assured of winning the heavily Democratic district. Vice President Spiro Agnew campaigned against the vocal critic of the Richard M. Nixon administration’s policy in Vietnam, labeling Dellums an “out-and-out radical” and an “enthusiastic backer of the Black Panthers.”<sup>9</sup> The Vice President’s visit to the district did little to slow Dellums’s momentum and, in fact, seemed to generate more publicity for his campaign. “One person I forgot to thank,” Dellums quipped in his victory speech, “my public relations agent, Spiro T. Agnew.”<sup>10</sup> Dellums defeated Republican candidate John Healy, a 25-year-old accountant, and third-party candidate Sarah Scahill with 57 percent of the vote to become one of the first African Americans to represent a majority-white congressional district.<sup>11</sup>

With his election to the 92nd Congress (1971–1973), Dellums quickly made headlines in his district and around the country. Unlike many freshman Members of Congress, who chose to learn the ropes quietly, Dellums adopted an active and vocal approach, introducing more than 200 pieces of legislation.<sup>12</sup> Groomed in the radical tradition of his district, he displayed little patience for congressional customs and the inner workings of the institution. After the House refused to conduct an investigation on possible American war crimes in Vietnam, he spearheaded a plan to hold his own ad hoc hearings—an unusual and controversial move that provoked scorn from some longtime politicians but drew considerable media

attention.<sup>13</sup> “I am not going to back away from being called a radical,” Dellums remarked defiantly during his first term. “If being an advocate of peace, justice, and humanity toward all human beings is radical, then I’m glad to be called a radical.”<sup>14</sup> He also convened informal hearings on racism in the military, an issue of personal importance because of the discrimination he encountered in the Marines.<sup>15</sup>

Dellums continued to make waves in the House, introducing a measure for comprehensive economic sanctions in South Africa during the 92nd Congress. The first legislator to propose such severe restrictions against the apartheid regime, Dellums, alongside the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), waged a long, intense battle to highlight the discriminatory practices of South Africa.<sup>16</sup> “We are serious in our determination that positive action be taken soon to terminate U.S. business relationships with apartheid and repression in Africa,” Dellums affirmed on behalf of the CBC in 1972. As one of the 13 Members who founded the organization in 1971 and served as its chairman for the 101st Congress (1989–1991), Dellums discovered an outlet for his activism with the CBC.<sup>17</sup> During the next 15 years, the California Representative led the charge against apartheid by sponsoring numerous bills to end U.S. support for the South African government and participating in a series of peaceful demonstrations—which, on one occasion, led to his arrest at the South African Embassy in Washington, DC.<sup>18</sup> In 1986, Dellums achieved one of his most significant legislative triumphs. As the floor manager of a bill calling for a U.S. trade embargo against South Africa and divestment by American companies of their holdings in the African nation, Dellums edged out a similar bill put forth by another black Member, William (Bill) Gray III of Pennsylvania, that included more modest sanctions. In an unusual turn of events, the opposition chose not to request a recorded roll call vote after a voice vote passed Dellums’s measure. Dellums expressed shock at how easily the bill had passed as well as profound satisfaction: “This is the highest point of my political life, the most significant and personally

rewarding,” Dellums rejoiced. “It’s been a long journey to this moment.”<sup>19</sup> Although the Senate ultimately passed a less stringent measure than the House, the two chambers united to override a veto by President Ronald W. Reagan easily. The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act became law on October 2, 1986.<sup>20</sup>

One of Dellums’s long-standing goals as a Representative was to slash the military budget. To pursue this objective effectively he sought a seat on the powerful Armed Services Committee for the 93rd Congress (1973–1975). While this decision may have seemed out of character for an antiwar politician, the Representative explained that if he could become well versed in military affairs, he would be better able to argue the merits of his views on military oversight.<sup>21</sup> The CBC drafted a letter to the Democratic leadership on Dellums’s behalf, but the chair of Armed Services, F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana, and the Committee on Committees opposed the appointment of an outspoken war critic. Refusing to yield, the CBC, led by Louis Stokes of Ohio and William (Bill) Clay, Sr., of Missouri, won the backing of Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma to place Dellums on the panel. He became the first African American to serve on the committee.<sup>22</sup> Retaliating for Dellums’s addition and that of a woman (Patricia Schroeder of Colorado) to his committee roster, Hébert set aside one seat for the two newcomers at the first Armed Services meeting in 1973. “Let’s not give these guys the luxury of knowing they can get under our skin,” Dellums urged Schroeder. “Let’s sit here and share this chair as if it’s the most normal thing in the world.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite this inauspicious start, Dellums rose through the ranks of Armed Services, serving on the panel for the rest of his House career. In 1983 he became chairman of the influential Subcommittee on Military Installations and Facilities. A decade later he made history as the first African-American chairman of Armed Services.<sup>24</sup> Initially some Members warned that Dellums’s record of opposition to defense appropriations would stymie the committee. But Dellums surprised his critics with his impartial

leadership that allowed a continued ban on gays in the military, a pay increase for the armed services, and a boost in anti-missile funding—all despite his objections.<sup>25</sup> He retained the chairmanship for one term but became the Ranking Member in 1995 when the Republicans took control of the House for the first time in 40 years.

Throughout his tenure on Armed Services, Dellums sought to build coalitions—even on the other side of the aisle—to accomplish his legislative goals. On several occasions, he worked with Republican John Kasich of Ohio to stop production of the B-2 bomber.<sup>26</sup> Dellums also consistently challenged another Cold War weapon, the MX missile—a land-based intercontinental ballistic missile that could deploy as many as 10 re-entry rockets, each topped by a 300-kiloton nuclear warhead. Beginning in 1977, he offered amendments to block its funding, and in 1980, after receiving a symbolic and short-lived nomination for President (he withdrew from contention moments later), Dellums used the forum to make a fervent speech about the need to cease MX manufacturing and “to reject war and inflation-combating policies that caused a rise in unemployment.”<sup>27</sup> In 1982 he proposed an alternative military budget—mirroring the CBC’s substitute budget—that slashed spending by more than \$50 billion. Though the resolution received little support outside the CBC, Dellums considered it one of his most meaningful legislative endeavors. “We will be back next year and the year after that and the year after that until we right the wrongs in this madness,” he asserted.<sup>28</sup> Dellums remained steady in his opposition to most U.S. military operations, including the American invasion of Grenada in 1983 and the Persian Gulf War in 1991, but he did support some peacekeeping efforts in Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>29</sup> His unwavering commitment to reduce military funding became a hallmark of his House tenure.

Assigned to the District of Columbia Committee during his first term in office, Dellums eventually chaired the panel from the 96th to the 102nd Congresses (1979–1993). Under his direction, the committee examined a range of issues affecting the nation’s capital

and other urban areas, such as transportation, schools, housing, and public safety.<sup>30</sup> Envisioning himself as “an advocate, not an overseer, of District affairs,” Dellums worked to achieve one of his major priorities, which he first introduced in 1971: statehood for Washington, DC.<sup>31</sup> “There should be no colonies in a democracy, and the District of Columbia continues to be a colony,” Dellums said after the committee voted in favor of a statehood measure in 1987.<sup>32</sup> As a Representative, he also served on the Foreign Affairs, Post Office and Civil Service, and Select Intelligence committees.

Dellums rarely faced serious re-election challenges, averaging more than 60 percent of the vote throughout most of his House career. Although Dellums reportedly had more than 800 overdrafts from the House “Bank,” his popularity among his constituents, especially in the urban areas of Oakland and Berkeley, allowed him to escape the fate of several Members who lost their congressional seats after they were linked to the House “Bank” scandal in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993). The reapportionment that took effect in 1992 created a safer district for the incumbent; with the elimination of the outlying suburbs, Dellums captured more than 70 percent of the vote in his three remaining contests.<sup>33</sup>

In February 1998, the 14-term Representative shocked his colleagues when he resigned from the House, citing personal reasons.<sup>34</sup> In his farewell speech, Dellums reflected on his long and successful career in the House: “To get up every day and put on your uniform and put on your tie and march on the floor of Congress knowing that, in your hands, in that card, in your very being, you have life and death in your hands, it is an incredible thing.”<sup>35</sup> After Congress, Dellums worked as a lobbyist, starting his own firm in Washington, DC. In 2006, he returned to the political spotlight when he was elected mayor of Oakland at age 70. “You just asked an old guy to come out of the comfort zone and play one more game,” Dellums observed.<sup>36</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

“Dellums, Ronald V.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000222>.

Dellums, Ronald V., and H. Lee Halterman. *Lying Down with the Lions: A Public Life from the Streets of Oakland to the Halls of Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

James, Victor V., Jr. “Cultural Pluralism and the Quest for Black Citizenship: The 1970 Ronald V. Dellums Congressional Primary Campaign.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1975.

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

**African American Museum and Library at Oakland** (Oakland, CA). *Papers*: ca. 1971–1998, approximately 235 cubic feet. The papers of Ronald V. Dellums are closed until processing is completed.

## NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (5 February 1998): H363.
- 2 Ronald V. Dellums and H. Lee Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions: A Public Life From the Streets of Oakland to the Halls of Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000): 9–12, 17–19, 25; Helen R. Houston, “Ronald V. Dellums,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 289 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*); “Dellums, Ronald V.,” *Current Biography*, 1972 (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1972): 104.
- 3 Sources conflict regarding Dellums’s divorce and remarriage dates. See Houston, “Ronald V. Dellums,” *NBAM*: 289; Guy Ashley, “City Holds Breath for Dellums,” 27 September 2005, *Contra Costa Times* (Walnut Creek, CA): F4.
- 4 “Dellums, Ronald V.,” *Current Biography*, 1993 (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1993): 152.
- 5 Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 41.
- 6 Daryl Lembke, “Cohelan Faces Strong Challenge in the Primary,” 27 May 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: 30.
- 7 Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 134.
- 8 “Black Defeats Veteran White Congressman,” 4 June 1970, *Chicago Tribune*: E11; Daryl Lembke, “Cohelan Upset in Congress Race by Negro,” 4 June 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: 3.
- 9 Daryl Lembke, “Welcomes Attack by Agnew, Dellums Says,” 10 October 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: 9; Bill Boyarsky, “Veysey Takes Lead in Tunney’s Old District,” 4 November 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: A33; William Chapman, “Agnew Says Democrats Embrace Radicalism,” 9 October 1970, *Washington Post*: A12.
- 10 “Nixon Backer, Agnew Target Win Contests,” 5 November 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: A3.
- 11 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/electionInfo/index.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html); Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 133–140.
- 12 Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 139.
- 13 Dellums led the movement for informal hearings on alleged war crimes in Vietnam. He was joined by three other Democrats: Bella Abzug of New York, John Conyers, Jr., of Michigan, and Parren Mitchell of Maryland. See “4 in the House Plan Hearings on War,” 7 April 1971, *New York Times*: 10; Lois Romano, “Ron Dellums, Waging Peace: The Longtime Anti-War Activist, From Grandstander to Seasoned Player,” 20 February 1991, *Washington Post*: C1; William Chapman, “4 Congressmen to Hold Inquiry on War Crimes,” 7 April 1971, *Washington Post*: A8.
- 14 Ray Mosley, “Violence Disavowed by Rep. Dellums,” 14 February 1971, *Washington Post*: 113.
- 15 In his memoirs, Dellums describes how an overt act of racism disqualified him for consideration as an officer in the Marines. See Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 22–23.
- 16 Ronald V. Dellums Interview: Conversations With History; Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Dellums/dellums-con0.html> (accessed 10 February 2000); Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 121–123; *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (16 February 1972): 4247. In his memoirs, Dellums cites February 1972 for the introduction of the measure, matching the *Congressional Record*. However, there is an earlier listing for proposed sanctions against South Africa by Dellums and Congressman John Conyers, Jr. See *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (15 December 1971): 47236.
- 17 Robert Singh, *The Congressional Black Caucus: Racial Politics in the U.S. Congress* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998): 65.
- 18 For example, see “Dellums Arrested in Ongoing South African Protest,” 29 November 1984, Associated Press; “Apartheid Protest Greets President Reagan at Capitol,” 7 February 1985, *Washington Post*: A19. For a detailed account of his arrest, see Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 127–129.
- 19 James R. Dickerson, “Dellums: Exoneration Is His,” 20 June 1986, *Washington Post*: A17; Edward Walsh, “House Would Require U.S. Disinvestment From South Africa,” 19 June 1986, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 20 Helen Dewar, “Congress Votes Sanctions on South Africa,” 13 September 1986, *Washington Post*: A1; Edward Walsh, “House Easily Overrides Veto of South Africa Sanctions,” 30 September 1986, *Washington Post*: A1; “Senate Overrides Reagan’s Veto of Sanctions 78 to 21,” 2 October 1986, *Los Angeles Times*: A1. Dellums provides a detailed account of the legislative effort in *Lying Down With the Lions*: 97–98.
- 21 Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 97–98.
- 22 Ibid., 99–103; Romano, “Ron Dellums, Waging Peace.”
- 23 Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 149–150. Historian Julian Zelizer referred to this incident and also detailed the downfall of Hébert as chairman of Armed Services in the post-Watergate reform era. See *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 135, 167–169.
- 24 “Dellums Approved to Head House Armed Services Committee,” 27 January 1993, Associated Press.
- 25 Gilbert A. Lewthwaite, “Dellums’ Lonely Fight in Armed Services,” 19 March 1994, *Baltimore Sun*: 2A.

26 Eric Schmitt, "House Panel Votes to Cut Off Bomber," 1 August 1990, *New York Times*: B6; Romano, "Ron Dellums, Waging Peace"; Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 118.

27 Herbert Denton Washington, "Dellums Uses His Brief Candidacy to Try to 'Energize' the Gathering," 14 August 1980, *Washington Post*: A15; Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 87.

28 Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down With the Lions*: 171; Dickenson, "Dellums: Exoneration Is His."

29 Lewthwaite, "Dellums' Lonely Fight in Armed Services"; *Politics in America*, 1998 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 113.

30 Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down with the Lions*: 95–96.

31 Donald P. Baker, "Dellums to Be 'Advocate' for DC," 27 January 1979, *Washington Post*: B1; "Fauntroy Attacks Plan on Statehood," 15 July 1971, *Washington Post*: E2.

32 "House Committee OKs Bill to Make District of Columbia a State," 4 June 1987, Associated Press.

33 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/electionInfo/index.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html); *Politics in America*, 1998: 113–114; Clifford Krauss, "Committee Names All Who Overdrew at the House Bank," 17 April 1992, *New York Times*: A1.

34 "House Welcomes New Member, Bids Farewell to 27-Year Veteran," 5 February 1998, Associated Press. Dellums provided more insight on his decision to retire from the House in his memoirs. "While for thirty years I had been willing to accept the call to service, it was now time for me to recapture my life. I had never had any intention of being 'carried out' of the Congress. I had always imagined returning to private life." See *Lying Down With the Lions*: 195.

35 *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (5 February 1998): H363.

36 Guy Ashley, "Dellums Announces Run for Mayor," 8 October 2005, *Contra Costa Times*; Heather MacDonald, "Dellums Promises Oakland Revival; City's 48th Mayor Focuses on Street Violence During Fiery Inaugural Speech at Famous Paramount Theatre," 9 January 2007, *Contra Costa Times*: F4.



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